THE ROMANTIC AND THE REAL: HENRY JAMES'S *THE SACRED FOUNT*

by Walter Isle

I

No single work by Henry James is more strikingly experimental than *The Sacred Fount*. It may at times appear to be little more than the "technical exercise" that Joseph Warren Beach first called it.[1] It does not attain the fullness of two other experiments, *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age;* the experimental, the even game-like aspects of the novel are never quite transformed, as they are in the two previous novels, to the successful, the proven. The degree of tenuousness and questioning, of hesitation and ambiguity in structure and meaning, suggests a new departure, but one made in the dark and toward an uncertain destination. *The Sacred Fount* is a trying-out, a final experiment before the achievements of the major phase. Since it was written, however, at the height of James's artistic powers, just after two successes and just before *The Ambassadors,* it has a strong claim on our attention. Much critical effort has been applied to the novel, particularly to its final meaning and to its literary value.[2] I believe that a clearer idea of that meaning and value can be attained by looking at the experimental aspects of the novel, especially in the light of this whole period of experiment from 1896 to 1901; technique, structure, and theme in the novel itself will then stand out more sharply.

An important fact in the history of *The Sacred Fount,* which has played a part in its evaluation, is that James did not include the novel in the New York Edition of 1907-09. His apparent rejection of the novel has led critics also to reject it. We must, however, form our judgment of the novel primarily on the novel itself. James was attempting in that collected edition to give a clear picture of his career as he saw it, and certain novels did not fit the plan. As Leon Edel notes, "The exclusions were not merely matters of 'taste' but related distinctly to the 'architecture' of the Edition."[3] That *The Sacred Fount* cannot be rejected simply because it did not fit

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Editor's Note: Mr. Isle is Assistant Professor of English at Rice University.

into this edition is also apparent from a glance at the other novels excluded: *Watch and Ward, The Europeans, Confidence, Washington Square, The Bostonians,* and *The Other House,* at least three of which have central places in the James canon.

Since *The Sacred Fount* was not included, there is no preface in which James could provide us with information about his intentions and methods of composition; and there are only very brief notebook entries on the novel.[4] Nevertheless, certain features of its composition are similar to those of the other novels of the period and provide an initial insight. The notebooks are of some help here. James's first notebook entry on *The Sacred Fount*—February 17, 1894—comes in the middle of that dramatic period when he jotted down the subjects for most of his later novels. He mentions the novel again in February and May of 1899 and evidently began the novel some time after that. It is probable that he spent much of 1900 writing the novel. Never serialized, it was published in February, 1901. As usual, James conceived the idea of *The Sacred Fount* as the subject of a short story, an "anecdote" and a "concetto" or conceit. And, again as usual, the novel expanded during composition, which will help account for certain structural features considered below. The short-story conception also helps somewhat to explain the use of a first person narrator, for the technique is common in James's short stories, particularly when that narrator is a detached observer, usually a critic or some kind of literary man, who objectively relates the story. The technique is often found in James's stories of artists and writers.[5]

In *The Sacred Fount* we find the same kind of observer, but James has transferred his attention to the subjective response of the man, rather in the manner of his use of the third person central consciousness in *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*. This transfer complicates story and theme, for the narrator's objectivity comes into doubt. *The Sacred Fount* is the only full-length novel in which James employs a first person narrator; only short novels like *The Aspern Papers* and *The Turn of the Screw* are comparable, and they have posed similar problems for the reader. The results of the use of this particular narrator and of James's focus on him are just those uncertain qualities which mark the novel as experimental, that mystification which the reader feels throughout. So our analysis must be concerned primarily with the peculiar problems of first person narration, especially as that affects the style of the novel, and with the structure within which that narrator moves. Theme and meaning follow from these.

II

The Sacred Fount has a simplicity of outline which is somewhat like

that of *The Other House,* the initial novel of this experimental period. There is none of the elaboration of character and society that can be found in *What Maisie Knew* or *The Awkward Age.* James again limits his characters to a handful. There are two perhaps symmetrically arranged couples: Mr. and Mrs. Brissenden, Gilbert Long and May Server; there is the narrator who observes the action and speculates on the arrangement; a painter, Ford Obert, with whom he discusses his ideas; and a subordinate figure, Lady John, who may or may not have some relation to one of the couples. None of the characters is developed at length, most have very little to say and are given only one or two individualizing traits. For the most part, they follow generally the Jamesian types found in the other novels of the period.[6] Gilbert Long, like Owen Gereth, is a hearty, robust gentleman, "a fine piece of human furniture"; Guy Brissenden has all the helplessness of that type with none of its strength; Grace Brissenden combines traits of Mrs. Gereth and Mrs. Brookenham, intelligent, forceful, and somewhat suspect; and May Server is the charming, beautiful, red-haired ingenue, with some unaccountable tragic quality about her. May is like Jean Martle, Fleda Vetch, Nanda Brookenham, and all those heroines of Henry James who are reputed to be modeled on his cousin Minny Temple. In spite of the vagueness of outline, she clearly points ahead to Milly Theale. All of these characters, however, do very little; they exist as types. And this brings us to an essential difference between *The Sacred Fount* and a novel like *The Other House.*

In *The Sacred Fount* there is almost no external action; more even than *The Awkward Age* the novel is static, an exploration of a situation. The story itself is extremely simple. The narrator, taking a train to the country for a weekend at a house called Newmarch, meets two acquaintances, Mrs. Brissenden and Gilbert Long. Mrs. Brissenden seems younger than he remembers her, and Gilbert Long seems cleverer. When he arrives at Newmarch, the narrator meets Guy Brissenden, who seems to have aged unnaturally, and he conceives the theory of the sacred fount—that one partner to a couple will draw on the gifts of the other, thus depleting the other's vitality. Mrs. Brissenden draws on her husband's youth and becomes younger while he ages too rapidly. To prove the theory and to provide symmetry, there must also be some woman who is giving Long his new intelligence. The remainder of the novel is taken up with the narrator's thirty-six-hour search for the woman and his effort to prove the theory. All of this search takes place in conversations with the other characters and in the narrator's solitary meditations. When Mrs. Brissenden denies his theory late the second night, the novel ends with the narrator's resolve to return to London early the next day. That is the extent of the action. The novel moves through a series of conversations which attempt

to explore the central situation, the relations among these people, in much the same manner that conversation is the method of *The Awkward Age.*

This simplicity is merely on the surface, however, and considerable complexity is introduced by James's narrative technique. All of the details of character and all the elements of the story come to us through the narrator, the "I." His theory of the sacred fount unifies the novel, brings all the conversations into focus; and his meditations on his theory, his sensitive response and endless intellectualizing upon that response make up the major part of the subject matter. For the first person narrator in *The Sacred Fount* is not a detached observer, conveying to the reader as objectively as possible the details of what he observes. His subjective experience of those objective details becomes the focus of the novel, just as Fleda Vetch's responses become the subject, rather than merely the recording consciousness of *The Spoils of Poynton.* In *The Sacred Fount* the mind of the narrator intrudes between the reader and the experience. The first person narrator has, as James says in the preface to *The Ambassadors,* "the double privilege of subject and object."[7] The impressionism which results has a direct bearing on both the difficulty and the meaning of the novel.

James also discusses in his preface to *The Ambassadors* his rejection of the first person technique for that novel, and his comments surely reflect on *The Sacred Fount,* its immediate predecessor: "Had I meanwhile made [the central figure—Strether] at once hero and historian, endowed him with the romantic privilege of the 'first person'—the darkest abyss of romance this, inveterately, when enjoyed on the grand scale—variety, and many other queer matters as well, might have been smuggled in by a back door."[8] He goes on to describe the "looseness" of the technique and "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation."[9] Looseness, fluidity, and romance are directly related to James's distinctions between the romantic and the real in the preface to *The American,* distinctions which are of exceptional value in understanding *The Sacred Fount,* for they are central to perceiving the narrator's role in the novel:

> The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we can never directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.[10]

James goes on to describe the kind of experience with which the romantic deals: "Experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know

to attach to it . . . and operating in a medium which relieves it . . . from the inconvenience of a *related,* a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities."[11] The separation of the first person narrator from his material, the subjective isolation of consciousness, is exactly the romantic nature of the form; the danger is that he will be cut off entirely from the real, that isolation will lead to "the darkest abyss of romance." The final meaning of the novel is directly involved in this dichotomy, and we can only get at that meaning through the narrator. The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* is one of James's most elaborate and disturbing characterizations, for he is a romantic confronting the materials of reality. James's innocents, Fleda Vetch especially, are in a similar situation; but in *The Sacred Fount* the technique places the reader in the narrator's mind, cut off from the "vulgar community." We see only his thought and his desire and share his inability to determine what is real.

The first person narrative technique limits the reader to what the narrator tells him. Placed in this position, the reader is forced to concern himself with the characteristics of the mind within which he is confined. By understanding its nature we can better understand its special relation to the external world and the material it presents us. In this novel, James focuses directly on the mind of the narrator, and that mind is so individualized, even eccentric, that it must have some effect on the material that passes through it. James's primary interest is with that effect, that subjective, romantic coloration and even transformation of reality.

The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* is a highly idiosyncratic figure. We learn early that he is an older man, that he is not attached to any of the people at Newmarch; he is in much the same relation to his society as Mr. Longdon in *The Awkward Age.* He is a detached observer of those around him. He is outwardly passive; we catch him at times lurking outside windows, overhearing conversations, watching people from a distance. He speaks of his "general habit—of observation."[12] Part of his separateness is his sensitivity, his unusual response to nuance and detail, to implication; he is almost hyper-observant. His shyness and careful privacy are also part of the role of outsider or observer. He has a horror of exposing his thoughts to the world. He does, however, have a great curiosity about other people, and he is an inveterate theorizer about their behavior. He speaks of his "extraordinary interest in my fellow-creatures. I have more than most men. I've never really seen anyone with half so much. That breeds observation and observation breeds ideas" (147). In addition to noting his habit of observation, two aspects of this speech are remarkable: his extreme egotism and his commitment to "ideas." Halfway through the novel he exults in his theory, describes it as "an undiluted bliss, in the intensity of consciousness that I had reached. *I* alone was magnificently

and absurdly aware—everyone else was benightedly out of it" (177). His egotism is grandiose; he thinks of his theory and the other characters as his "creations": "to see all this was at the time, I remember, to be as inhumanly amused as if one had found one could create something" (104). Throughout he tends to see himself as god or artist—Lady John at one point tells him to give up "the attempt to be providence" (176).

His ideas are behind all his interests; he is drawn into the affairs of others, "though always but intellectually." As his theory of the sacred fount begins to form, he describes his feelings and thoughts as those of the philosopher (and, interestingly, partly in the language of the detective):

> I felt from the first that if I was on the scent of something ultimate I had better waste neither my wonder nor my wisdom. I was on the scent. . . . I was just conscious, vaguely, of being on the track of a law, a law that would fit, that would strike me as governing the delicate phenomena—delicate though so marked—that my imagination found itself playing with. A part of the amusement they yielded came, I daresay, from my exaggerating them—grouping them into a larger mystery (and thereby a larger "law") than the facts, as observed, yet warranted; but that is a common fault of minds for which the vision of life is an obsession. (22-23)

The result of this obsession is "the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable, that joy of determining, almost of creating results" (214). Two characteristics stand out in addition to his intellectual bent: his imagination and his obsession. The whole novel is a testament to the obsession; only an obsession could build so much on so slight a base. But to understand that obsession, his "private madness," we must look further into his character.

His imagination combines with his intellect to give a compelling force to his vision. The artistic, creative nature of his hypothesis about the people around him is in part his imaginative coloration of the "laws" of human behavior. The clearest indication of how his imagination enhances what he sees comes during a moment he spends alone in the gardens, away from people and the need to observe and theorize:

> There was a general shade in all the lower reaches—a fine clear dusk in garden and grove, a thin suffusion of twilight out of which the greater things, the high tree-tops and pinnacles, the long crests of motionless wood and chimnied roof, rose into golden air. The last calls of birds sounded extraordinarily loud; they were like the timed, serious splashes, in wide, still water, of divers not expecting to rise again. I scarce know what odd consciousness I had of roaming at close of day in the grounds of some castle of enchantment. I had positively encountered nothing to compare with this since the days of fairy-tales and of the childish imagination of the impossible. *Then* I used to circle round enchanted castles, for then I moved in a world in which the strange "came true." It was the coming true that was the proof of the enchantment, which, moreover, was naturally never so great as when such coming was, to such a degree and by

> the most romantic stroke of all, the fruit of one's own wizardry. I was positively—so had the wheel revolved—proud of my work. I had thought it all out, and to have thought it was, wonderfully, to have brought it. (128-29)

The passage touches on all his characteristics: intellect, egotism, sensitivity. But it is even more revealing of the narrator's romantic imagination, his painting of reality with strokes of beauty, strangeness, enchantment, wizardry. Characteristically, he has this romantic vision in solitude, just as later in the novel, he moves out into the night alone and finds "the breath of the outer air a sudden corrective to the grossness of our lustre and the thickness of our medium, our general heavy humanity" (199). The house then becomes "our crystal cage." The narrator's intellect and his imagination enable him to escape from this cage of reality into a romantic world which will accommodate his pure and elegant theory of the sacred fount.

At the same time, however, his imagination does not entirely free him from the "grossness" and "thickness" of "heavy humanity." Intellectually, it remains pure and light, but humanly it is often "the imagination of atrocity" (173) or, as it is also for Fleda Vetch, "the imagination of a disaster." The odd and remarkable metaphor in the center of the passage quoted above is a brilliant example of that; the quiet notation of the "divers not expecting to rise again" is an indication of this aspect of the narrator's imagination. The theory of the sacred fount, for all the symmetry and beauty it embodies for the narrator, is a theory of vampirism, the destruction of one human being by another, the drawing out of life. Although quieter and less explicit, it is much like Hawthorne's representation of evil in *The Scarlet Letter*.[13]

The narrator, then, is a romantic egotist with an intellect of some power and an imagination of great force, capable of giving him joy but at the same time profoundly, though perhaps unconsciously, morbid. For him humanity offers little more than material for the pleasures of the mind, although a bleaker vision hides beneath joy. As he notes, "Light or darkness, my imagination rides me" (276).

The nature of the man is reflected in his language; we cannot escape his character for we must read his words. And one of the principal difficulties in reading this at times obtuse work is the style. As the narrator himself comments, when one of the characters accuses him of being crazy, of not being understandable: "No, I daresay, to do you justice, the interpretation of my tropes and figures *isn't* 'ever' perfectly simple" (284). The variety of his figures runs from those suicidal divers to the sacred fount itself, a horror under its sacredness, and to his conception of himself in the final scene with Mrs. Brissenden as "an exemplary Christian" watched by "a Roman lady at a circus."

"Tropes and figures" do provide one of the major vehicles of the nar-

rator's thought, but even more prominent and finally more difficult in its sheer volume is his intellectual, abstract, elaborate prose style. The whole of Chapter VI is an almost impenetrable example of his mental activity, an extreme form of the style found in the meditations of Fleda Vetch; but a few shorter passages must represent the quality of his mind and the nature of his expression. The narrator "reflects" in the following manner: "What was none of one's business might change its name should importunity take the form of utility. In resisted observation that was vivid thought, in inevitable thought that was vivid observation, through a succession, in short, of phases in which I shall not pretend to distinguish one of these elements from the other, I found myself cherishing the fruit of the seed dropped equally by Ford Obert and by Mrs. Briss" (93-4). And again, later: "If there had been, so to speak, a discernment, however feeble, of *my* discernment, it would have been irresistible to me to take this as the menace of some incalculable catastrophe or some public ugliness. It wasn't for me definitely to image the logical result of a verification by the sense of others of the matter of my vision" (174). This is James's prose at its densest and most abstract, and comprehending it takes some effort. Above all, the prose shows the density, the convolutions and intricate intellectual movements of the narrator's mind. The style mirrors the man in this first person narrative, and we finally agree with his own judgment: "I daresay that . . . my cogitations—for I must have bristled with them—would have made me as stiff a puzzle to interpretative minds as I had suffered other phenomena to become to my own" (92). The intricate prose style presents the character and forms throughout the novel an abstract, almost unreal medium in which the drama of the novel takes place.

III

The drama and the style are present in the opening paragraph of the novel, a meditative passage in which the narrator reveals details of his character that will gain in significance as the "action" progresses: "It was an occasion, I felt—the prospect of a large party—to look out at the station for others, possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going. Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy ambiguities" (1). The narrator's logical turn of mind and his tendency to think in rather melodramatic blacks and whites is evident, although this is modified by the added third alternative, ambiguities—which he will not always find "happy."[14] A few lines below, the narrator mentions, only to disclaim, what will be his greatest weakness: "the wish was father to the thought." His sensitivity, even his fear of

others, is noted as he chooses to avoid one of the other members of the party.

In that opening moment the character and mind of the narrator are hinted at, and we move on to be intensely present in each of his impressions and in his obsessions with the behavior of other people. *The Sacred Fount* is subtly dramatic, a further example of James's experimentation with the possibilities of the dramatic novel. Much of the novel is given over to conversations between the narrator and usually only one of the other characters, scenes in dialogue which are typically in the manner of *The Awkward Age* and the other novels of this period. Balancing this, however, is the dramatic immediacy of the meditations that go on in the mind of the narrator, and this is peculiar to *The Sacred Fount*. These passages can best be described as interior monologues which are controlled and intellectualized in a way that stream of consciousness usually is not. While they bear some similarity to passages of meditation involving centers of consciousness like Fleda Vetch or Maisie Farange, the analysis and abstraction are more extreme, as noted above, and at the same time the use of the first person strongly increases the sense of the dramatic present. Although he is recounting the story from a later time, the narrator seldom breaks the illusion of the present and tells more than he knows at a particular moment; James uses this to create drama and suspense, and to keep the reader moving at the pace of the narrator, mystified and expectant.

The quality of suspense in the drama of the novel is partly that of the mystery story, and James from time to time, as noted in one of the passages above, uses imagery from the detective story. One of the other characters, Ford Obert, warns the narrator about prying and searching for "material clues," but Obert assures the narrator that it can be an "honorable" game—when it relies on "psychologic signs alone, it's a high application of intelligence. What's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole" (66). The narrator takes this for assurance of his own purity of motive, although he still longs for a material clue. Moreover, scents, clues, false scents, covering one's tracks, and evidence of various sorts are all part of the narrator's vocabulary.

The suspense and immediacy of the drama are an integral part of the structure of the novel. James immerses us in the mind of the narrator as he wanders through his weekend at Newmarch. Each impression, each reflection is carefully recorded in its place, each conversation as it occurs. A good deal of the intensity of the drama is the result of this closeness to the present and the narrow limits of the duration of the action. James stays close to chronological time. The whole of the action takes about thirty-six hours; most of it occurs between morning and midnight of the

second day. And James observes the other traditional dramatic unities of place and action.[15]

The drama of *The Sacred Fount* falls into phases typical of James's construction during this period. There are four or perhaps five "acts" in the novel, and each serves a particular purpose in the development of the action and the narrator's thought. The first act or phase of the action, Chapters I and II, is a prelude which introduces the characters and gives an initial exposition of the narrator's theory and the themes of the novel. The act takes place the afternoon before the day of the main action. Act two begins the next morning, establishes the relationship between the narrator and Mrs. Brissenden, and complicates the action and theme in a series of conversations and the scene before the picture of the man with the mask (Chapters III-V). Chapter VI is partly transitional; it carries the action over a time interval until late afternoon and summarizes the narrator's mental and imaginative progress. It begins the third phase of the action, which continues through Chapters VII and VIII. This third act concentrates on the two depleted figures in the formula of the sacred fount, Guy Brissenden and May Server. It also marks the narrator's closest approach to emotional involvement with the other characters. As the center of the novel, it illustrates the highest complication of his theory and his greatest confidence. After another time interval, the fourth act begins with the narrator's decision to give up his inquiry, partly because of his emotional identification with the depleted pair. The whole of the fourth phase, however (Chapters IX-XI), contains the narrator's gradual return to the theory, revealed mostly through his mental reactions to what he observes during an evening of wandering and watching. The section ends with a conversation with Ford Obert, who, through his own partial enthusiasm for the theory, is able to reinforce the narrator's obsession. The fifth phase (which might perhaps be considered part of the fourth, since there is no time interval) is the long scene with Mrs. Brissenden and the narrator (Chapters XII-XIV). Here the narrator's theory is apparently destroyed, and the focus of the action is on the irreconcilable split between his mind and reality, on his inability ever really to know the truth about the people he has been observing.[16]

The overall pattern in the action is simply a deepening of the narrator's consciousness and a more and more intense participation in the present. The first three phases take up the first half of the novel; the final two phases, the last evening, comprise the last half; and the final long scene with Mrs. Brissenden, although it takes but one hour in the time of the action, occupies fully a quarter of the novel. This slowing of the pace actually marks a gradual increase in the drama, and the form is in this sense quite similar to that of *The Spoils of Poynton* or *What Maisie Knew*.

It is as if James's further penetration into a subject means closer and closer attention to the present, to the immediate and dramatic. James gradually draws closer to the situation in order to explore every possible aspect; at the same time he moves slowly toward a complete recording of everything that transpires in a given moment. The effect of this movement in *The Sacred Fount* is progressively to heighten the intensity of the narrator's obsession and to emphasize in detail the final contrast between Mrs. Brissenden and himself.

The dramatic structure of *The Sacred Fount* also parallels some of James's earlier experiments in the combination of scene and meditation. The scene presents the objective view and the meditation the subjective, with the qualification that the narrator's consciousness is to some extent present throughout most of the scenes; the continual alternation from scene to meditation keeps the structure of the novel balanced. The first two phases are made up of very short scenes followed by short meditations in which the narrator attempts to account for the objective details. This alternation continues through the third phase, although a predominance of meditation, especially in Chapters VI and VIII, indicates the narrator's increasing subjective involvement. In the scene with the narrator and May Server, for example, in Chapter VIII, the woman says almost nothing; everything is given to the reader through the subjective filter of the narrator's speeches and thoughts. This subjective, meditative movement continues into the fourth section, broken only by the brief conversation with Lady John in Chapter IX, until Ford Obert once more brings an objectivity into this almost stifling engrossment in the narrator's subjective speculations. The brilliant final scene with the narrator and Mrs. Brissenden, one of the longest sustained scenes in the novels of this period, marks a balance between subjectivity and objectivity and reveals James's mastery of the scenic technique. The narrator's thoughts are continually present, but they are repeatedly pierced by Mrs. Brissenden's assertions. The subjective is presented in a balanced war with the objective, and the result is a stalemate. The pendulum swing from scene to meditation is finally balanced in a scene where both are fully present, as they were at times in *What Maisie Knew* and as they will be in *The Ambassadors.*

The dialogue of these scenes and the thought-patterns of the meditations follow forms common to the novels of this period, and they enhance the artistic construction of James's novel. The dramatic structure of acts divided into scenes and meditations is paralleled and reinforced by the balanced logic of the narrator's mind. One rather exaggerated example must serve to indicate his logical insistence: "Lady John and Guy Brissenden, in the arbour, were thinking secludedly together; they were together, that is, because they were scarce a foot apart, and they were thinking,

I inferred, because they were doing nothing else" (101). His mental patterns follow this deductive form; he invariably applies logic and reason to human behavior.[17] The theory of the sacred fount is an absolute, once the narrator has first propounded it, to which all evidence is submitted, then accepted if it fits or rejected if it does not. The conclusion of the novel results from this kind of thinking; the narrator's theory meets only with Mrs. Brissenden's denial. The dichotomy remains unresolved, open. His theory is also formalized and balanced in a manner similar to the structure of the novel, although he can recognize, but not give up, the dangerous artificiality of his formula: "These opposed couples balanced like bronze groups at the two ends of a chimney piece, and the most that I could say in lucid deprecation of my thought was that I mustn't take them equally for granted merely *because* they balanced. Things in the real had a way of not balancing; it was all an affair, this fine symmetry, of artificial proportion. Yet . . . it was vivid to me that, 'composing' there beautifully, they could scarce help playing a part in my exhibition" (183). Opposition, balance, symmetry are opposed to "things in the real," and they have all played a part in James's conceptions, as for example in the balanced form of *The Spoils of Poynton* or the intricate oppositions and symmetries of the couples in *What Maisie Knew* or *The Awkward Age.* In *The Sacred Fount* James uses the same kind of structure, yet the balance and symmetry, as we can see in the passage above, are also objectified by James and made a part of the mental bias of the narrator who insists on finding symmetries.

The dialogue in the novel also reinforces the form. When the narrator is not tracing out his syllogisms in his mind, he is trying them out on others. The question-and-answer technique in conversation, used in earlier novels in the period, is extremely valuable here in sustaining the mystery and heightening the quest for a solution. The conversations are much like the inquiries of a detective, in which the narrator attempts continually to gain information from the others, or in which they occasionally try to understand what he is getting at. The submerged effect, as usual in James's novels, is of a total failure of communication between, in this case, the narrator and every other person. In a similar fashion, James uses the technique of the debate in the last scene to point up elaborately the difference between Mrs. Brissenden's and the narrator's visions of the world. The careful balance between assertion and admission of points only heightens the split between the two. The debate is a draw. The narrator is still unable to bridge the gap between himself and "things in the real."

IV

The balances, symmetries, and oppositions in the structure are paralleled

by the thematic patterns which often exist as dialectical tensions. The final words of the novel, the narrator's statement that "It wasn't really that I hadn't three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone" (319), set up a dichotomy which in retrospect informs all the themes of the novel. The narrator attempts, using the methods of reason, to establish order, to find a theory which will account for the behavior of the observed characters. Mrs. Brissenden finally contradicts this theory with a flat denial and a crude assertion of the realities of the social world.

The social situation is at the base of all this. In its way *The Sacred Fount* is as strong a criticism of James's society as *The Awkward Age* or *What Maisie Knew*. The narrator's theory is abstract, pure, and beautiful, as he maintains, but these qualities are a mask for the reality from which it derives. It raises to the level of apologue or parable, to metaphor, the corrupt conditions of life in the world of Newmarch. The masked assumption is of couples and coupling, of hidden liaisons and immoral arrangements. The sacred fount in itself is a euphemism for some sort of sexual depletion or vampirism; but the narrator sees in all these arrangements a purity and elegance. He sees them all as people "deeply in love," with "a great pressure of soul to soul" and "the seal of passion" (16,17). The one unquestionable example of a liaison, however, is "that Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley were in the wondrous new fashion—and their servants too, like a single household—starting, travelling, arriving together" (4). Newmarch itself (as the name tells us) is in that "wondrous new fashion," "a funny house . . . I'm not sure that anyone *has* gone to bed. One does what one likes" (244-45). The new fashion here is the same modern morality that James found repellent in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age;* it is a newness that James represents as "moral squalor," to use F. R. Leavis's term for it. The narrator is reacting to the same situation that confronted Mr. Longdon and endangered Maisie. His reaction is to try to enhance it, romanticize it, draw from it what beauty he can; but it remains squalid. He never judges the outside world morally in any direct way; all his moral judgments are usually turned on himself. But when he comes closest to being drawn in emotionally, he reveals the horror that has been masked by his intellectual joy. The atrocities he can imagine are then apparent. When he sees May Server, he sees the viciousness of the sacred fount: "I saw as I had never seen before what consuming passion can make of the marked mortal on whom, with fixed beak and claws, it has settled as a prey. She reminded me of a sponge wrung dry and with fine pores agape. Voided and scraped of everything, her shell was merely crushable. So it was brought home to me that the victim could be abased" (136). The hollowness of the drained victim, the images of the scraped shell, the dry sponge, all this overwhelms any beauty; and the passion is

one which consumes. Whether or not the narrator is right about May Server's place in his scheme, through his vision James gives us a profound comment on the effect of the fashionable love-game all these couples are engaged in. The society in *The Sacred Fount* is as corrupt as in *The Awkward Age,* but the narrator's romantic theory keeps him from seeing this very often.[18]

His theory also tends to cover up any difference between appearance and reality, a second major theme in the novel.[19] For the narrator, and to some extent even for the reader, there is finally no way of distinguishing between true and false, real and unreal. The narrator must, not knowing the truth, attempt to guess at it through the appearance of the other characters. When Mrs. Brissenden asserts different relationships among the characters, the narrator has no way of knowing whether she is lying to protect herself or telling the truth. He has no way of knowing whether or not he is deceived by appearance, perhaps even crazy, as she says. Reality remains hidden to him.

This is nowhere better shown than in the symbolic portrait of the man with the mask in Chapter IV. The narrator examines the portrait with May Server, Ford Obert, and Gilbert Long (a scene that is repeated in the same form and for some of the same purposes in *The Wings of the Dove*): "The figure represented is a young man in black—a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some old-world clown. In his hand he holds an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human" (55). May Server says that the object is "the Mask of Death," but the narrator insists that it is "much rather the Mask of Life," that it is the face of the man that is dead. Customary symbolism would indicate that May Server is right, that the mask is appearance, lifeless, while the face is reality, life. But the sort of reality that is hidden behind the narrator's theory of the sacred fount is death-in-life, as is evident from his description of May Server (quoted above), and this is the effect of the pale, livid man in black. The mask then has perhaps the quality of life that he attributes to it. It is, he says, "blooming and beautiful," but it has a "grimace" which the narrator cannot see. It is an "obscure," "ambiguous work of art," which is just what his theory is, for he can perceive only intermittently the grimace that is embodied in his theory, the horror that is transformed to art by his imagination. The portrait is consciously ambiguous itself. It represents both death and life, the reality of death-in-life of the face and the artifice of life-in-art of the mask, the appearance which masks reality. This central

ambiguity is what keeps the narrator's romantic, artistic vision separate from the vision of all the others, as that is finally represented by Mrs. Brissenden.[20]

In *The Sacred Fount,* as in *The Spoils of Poynton,* art and life are separate, and the artistic individual is divorced from life.[21] The narrator in this novel has some of the same innocence and inviolability of Fleda Vetch or Nanda Brookenham, and it keeps him apart from life. His essential sterility is the same as that which James objectified in other ways in all his tales of unlived life and half-dead, middle-aged men like John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle." The divorce between life and the individual in the novel is combined with the epistemological theme, the effort to detect the difference between appearance and reality. The effort here, however, ends in total failure. There is no way of distinguishing true and false. Out of these various themes and the narrator's speculations develops the final meaning of the novel, James's vision of truth in *The Sacred Fount.*

We have seen that the narrator has method, obsession, and an intense interest in his fellow-creatures. Out of this he spins a beautiful theory about the relationships among them. It is a theory with symmetry and balance, based on incessant observation and a belief in passionate love. At the heart, however, it is a theory of the destruction of one individual by another, for James as for Hawthorne the greatest of human sins. Based as it is on the appearances of people, there is no way of telling how accurate the theory is for the particular case. The narrator is so isolated from the rest of humanity that he has no way of verifying his hypothesis through experience or through getting the "objective proof" for which he longs. His proof must remain subjective, based on his general knowledge of human nature. In this, the theory does point to a truth, reinforced as it is by the nature of the society and by the symbolic portrait of the man with the mask. But it remains a general, unparticularized truth. For all the narrator's observations and ratiocination, the truth remains intuitive and comes to him through his "imagination of atrocity." He had as much of it early in the novel as at the finish, perhaps more. What finally defeats him, refuses to accept either him or his theory, calls him crazy, is the tone of the society which he observes, represented at the end by Mrs. Brissenden, a tone of harsh, insolent reality. This is perhaps truly life, but it is disordered and meaningless. The narrator's vision, on the other hand, is art, ordered and beautiful. The two are separate worlds, united only by a general truth to human nature, the conditions of existence. James carefully introduces the allegory of the cave late in the novel to suggest that the narrator's theory is perhaps a way to reality. Obert, using the narrator's vision, has "blown on my torch . . . till, flaming and smoking, it has

guided me, through a magnificent chiaroscuro of colour and shadow, out into the light of day" (222). The narrator is "dazzled" by the metaphor. It represents the possible triumph of his vision, the discovery of reality through art.[22]

But the narrator's paradoxically intuitive and logical approach, his artistic and intellectual vision comes up against Mrs. Brissenden immediately after this. She denies, as we have seen, any truth to his theory of the sacred fount, and tells him that he may be insane. And so perhaps he finally is. *The Sacred Fount* may stand as a parable for Henry James's difficulties and beliefs as an artist, for his vision of the relationship between art and reality. But, if so, it is conceived in a moment of despair. For the whole structure of the novel points to the same meaning inherent in the themes. There is a final and total split between the vision of Mrs. Brissenden and that of the narrator, between life and art.[23] We must, however, look further; there is a distinction to be made between the narrator's potential insanity and James's meaning.

The narrator's spirits have been high throughout the novel. His intellectual joy is marred only by fears of failure and, briefly, by his feelings for May Server. The last phase of the novel, however, is a movement further and further into doubt, until the narrator finally feels that he will never again "quite hang together." The effects on his intellectual egotism are even stronger, and he admits his alienation from life at the moment he most clearly recognizes the implications of his position: "I could only say to myself that this was the price—the price of secret success, the lonely liberty and the intellectual joy. There were things that for so private and splendid a revel—that of the exclusive king with his Wagner opera—I could only let go, and the special torment of my case was that the condition of light, of the satisfaction of curiosity and of the attestation of triumph, was in this direct way the sacrifice of feeling. . . . I was there to save my priceless pearl of an inquiry and to harden, to that end, my heart" (296). The recognition of the price of art is complete. The divorce between art and life, even between the individual and the world, imposes sacrifices. Like Fleda Vetch and Nanda Brookenham, the narrator is left free, but it is a "lonely liberty," a freedom provided by isolation. And the isolation means not only the death of the heart, but also never truly knowing the world, never being able to verify his intuitions. Any conception then is a dream, a vision, a madness.

But even if the narrator is left isolated, there is still some connection with the world through his theory. His egotism and his intellect contribute to his isolation, but his romantic imagination explains what kind of connection he has with the world he still lives in. The "private and splendid revel," the Wagner opera, the "priceless pearl of an inquiry" are all

romantic visions of the real world. The ambiguous mask of life or death is separate from but contains some truth about the real world. The narrator at the end of the novel has come up against "things in the real," "the things we cannot possibly *not* know," the accidents of the world we live in—in this case the disordered, promiscuous relationships in the society which the narrator inhabits. These are, for James, the real. But the narrator cannot conceive or cannot admit promiscuity or chaos; he is obsessed with order. And so he discovers only the things "we can never directly know; the things that reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire."[24] He discovers the essence of the world through the romantic, which for James is "experience disengaged," which is not "a state subject to all our vulgar communities."[25] *The Sacred Fount* points finally to the distinction between the romantic and the real. James's achievement is that he goes beyond the narrator and gives us, in the balanced structure of the novel, a vision of both states, of the romantic and the real, of the essence and accident of the world.

James achieves this, however, only with considerable sacrifice. *The Sacred Fount* is an obtuse, difficult novel, and the form is almost too limited a vehicle for James's vision. The confusions and limitations of the first person narrator almost mask the success of the author. For the novel is one of despair; the final balanced vision means a loss of purity. The narrator disintegrates before us as a corrupt world imposes itself on his artistic vision, leaving doubt as the only possible attitude. *The Sacred Fount* has an undercurrent of despair that is not controlled by our final realization of the meaning of the narrator's experience. This kind of despair is controlled in a novel like *The Awkward Age*. The society may reject Nanda, but she remains intact; the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* does not.

The undertones of *The Sacred Fount* show a tragic vision of life which points forward to the twentieth century, to James's next novels and to other novelists who follow him. For what we are confronted with is a finely, complexly constructed novel in which the main sensations are of failure: the failure of perception, of communication, of belief. What remain most strongly with us are madness, alienation, the inability to feel, and the loneliness of freedom, central themes in many novels of this century. *The Sacred Fount* exhibits James's mastery of his dramatic techniques, his use of a kind of interior monologue, and his careful attention to structure, which almost results in that organic form so many novelists were consciously to work for. The form of the novel, with its restriction to the subjective, individual consciousness, is one best understood in comparison to novels of a later period. At the same time James is also close to offering one of the major, twentieth-century solutions to the chaos of

life—salvation through art. Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf all offered this as the only answer to the conditions James presents in *The Sacred Fount*. The narrator's theory of the sacred fount is an artistic vision for ordering experience similar in nature to Proust's vision in the last volume of *A la Recherche du Temps perdu,* when the narrator of that novel decides that only by recreating his experience in a work of art can he make it meaningful. James's narrator has not had and never will have this final vision, for James in his synthesis of the romantic and the real has ruled out the separate artistic vision which is all the narrator can achieve; he rules out systems of the sort by which his contemporary Henry Adams attempted to explain the same kind of experience. Perhaps James's novel is closer in theme, in the delineation of the relationship between the romantic and the real, to a novel by one of his contemporaries published only a year before his—Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim;* for James's art is always of the world he lives in, of the individual alienated from but struggling with his world. It is the true novelist's vision.

The close of *The Sacred Fount* marks the end of five years of experiments in the novel for Henry James, and he moves on to larger visions of the individual struggling with the world in *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove,* and *The Golden Bowl.* The achievement of the period of experiment in the form of the novel is best represented in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age;* but in the final novel of that period, James again demonstrates his mastery of form and the value of experiment in the novel. The complexity and vision in this experiment point ahead. *The Sacred Fount* is of 1901.

NOTES

1. Joseph Warren Beach, *The Method of Henry James* (Philadelphia, 1954), pp. 250-54.
2. The output begins to equal that dealing with *The Turn of the Screw*. The most valuable essay remains Leon Edel's introduction to his edition of *The Sacred Fount* (New York, 1953). Other interesting general essays are Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 167-94; Laurence Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 183-226. Most of the other essays of value will be cited in the notes below.
3. Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, *A Bibliography of Henry James* (London, 1957), p. 168.
4. Henry James, *The Notebooks,* ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1955), pp. 150-51, 275 and 292.
5. For an analysis of the background of the novel in the short story see Claire J. Raeth, "Henry James's Rejection of *The Sacred Fount*," *ELH,* XVI (Dec. 1949), 308-24.

6. For a discussion of character types in James's fiction of this period see J. A. Ward, *The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James* (Lincoln, 1961), pp. 86-87.
7. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel,* ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), p. 321.
8. *Ibid.,* p. 320.
9. *Ibid.,* p. 321.
10. *Ibid.,* pp. 31-32.
11. *Ibid.,* p. 33.
12. Henry James, *The Sacred Fount,* ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1953), p. 89. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
13. Various comparisons with Hawthorne have been made. See also Leo B. Levy, "What Does *The Sacred Fount* Mean?" *College English,* XXIII, 381; James K. Folsom, "Archimago's Well: An Interpretation of *The Sacred Fount,*" *Modern Fiction Studies,* VII (Summer 1961), 141.
14. See also Robert J. Andreach, "Henry James's *The Sacred Fount:* The Existential Predicament," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* XVII (December, 1962), 198-99.
15. See also R. P. Blackmur, "The Sacred Fount," *Kenyon Review,* IV (Autumn, 1942), 347.
16. For a comparison of the structure of the novel with a double fugue see Joseph Weisenfarth, F.S.C., *Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy* (New York, 1963), p. 104.
17. See Andreach, "Henry James's *The Sacred Fount,*" p. 203, for a discussion of the narrator's method of thought.
18. In *The Novels of Henry James* (New York, 1961), p. 287, Oscar Cargill argues that the narrator is corrupted by the society.
19. For a discussion of appearance and reality in the novel see Edel, "Introduction," pp. xvi-xx.
20. See also Edel, "Introduction," pp. xviii-xx; Krook, *Ordeal of Consciousness,* p. 177n; Holland, *The Expense of Vision,* pp. 197-98; James Reaney, "The Condition of Light: Henry James's *The Sacred Fount,*" *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XXXI (January, 1962), 143-44.
21. The classic identification of the narrator with James is in Wilson Follett, "Henry James's Portrait of Henry James," *New York Times Book Review* (August 23, 1936), 2, 16.
22. For a discussion of the epistemological theme see the essays by Krook and Edel.
23. This recurrent theme in James's work finds its classic statements in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* in James, *The Art of the Novel,* p. 120: "Life being all inclusion and confusion and art being all discrimination and selection"; life is "nothing but splendid waste"; and in James's letters to H. G. Wells in *The Portable Henry James,* ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York, 1951), pp. 482-89. See also Landon C. Burns, "Henry James's Mysterious Fount," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* (Winter, 1960-61), 524-26.
24. James, *The Art of the Novel,* p. 32.
25. *Ibid.,* p. 33.